# The Legitimation of Sexual Violence through Pictorial Works

*Legitimación de las violencias sexuales a través de las obras pictóricas*

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## Key words

Legitimation
- Artworks
- Painting
- Rape
- Violence

## Abstract

This paper analyses the representation and legitimation of sexual violence in some paintings that have historically been recognised as works of art. The analysis adopts a multidisciplinary perspective that combines visual sociology and feminist theory. The aim is to review the intentions, implications and roles of museum paintings that naturalise sexual violence through symbolic legitimation. The most important results are: a) the harm caused by sexual violence has been either omitted or minimised, and victims have frequently been beautified, b) women artists have played a more prominent role in delegitimising sexual violence, and c) conceptions of sexual violence have varied across historical contexts. To conclude, the article presents some ensuing suggestions to foster a critical approach to representations of sexual violence in museum artworks.

## Palabras clave

Legitimación
- Obras de arte
- Pintura
- Violación
- Violencia

## Resumen

Desde una perspectiva pluridisciplinar donde convergen la sociología visual y la perspectiva feminista, analizamos la representación y legitimación de la violencia sexual en algunas pinturas reconocidas como obras de arte en la historia. El objetivo es revisar las intenciones, implicaciones y funciones de las pinturas recogidas en los museos que naturalizan la violencia sexual a través de la legitimación simbólica. Los resultados más relevantes son: a) la omisión o minimización del daño producido por la violencia sexual y el embellecimiento de las víctimas, b) la mayor deslegitimación de la violencia sexual por parte de las mujeres artistas y c) la evolución histórica de la mirada a la violencia sexual. Finalmente, presentamos algunas sugerencias que se pueden derivar para favorecer una mirada crítica a la representación de las obras de arte en los museos.

## Citation

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## INTRODUCTION

The emotional power of images and their ability to prompt action has been clearly and compellingly established in recent years from a broad range of philosophical, historical and sociological perspectives. The image philosopher Horst Bredekamp conceived "image acts" as:

Impacting upon the feelings, thoughts and motivation of engaged observers [...]. He argued that "one may speak of true enlightenment only if this embraces the visual, the haptic and the auditory (Bredekamp, 2018: 34-35).

According to Walter Benjamin (2005), certain images—including paintings and other works of art—function like a flash of lightning, briefly illuminating aspects of the past that may have previously gone unrecognised or remained hidden at first glance. Some images, particularly those that depict historical events or figures, have the ability to stimulate or activate the collective through ideology and political theory. In this way, they enable us to engage in a critical reading of history and contribute to discovering new ways of viewing society, as well as new dimensions or perceptions of justice. Didi-Huberman (2014, 2017) adopted Benjamin's interpretation as his own, and highlighted the political dimension inherent in every artistic image. Viewers are both interrogated and challenged by images; such images possess a dialectical nature (which encompasses both what observes and what is observed) and initiate a dialogue with the observer. Images take political stances, trigger memory and critical thinking, and are particularly significant when they are related to violence (Didi-Huberman, 2008).

Luc Pauwels's (2015) approach to visual sociology is based on the idea that images, and in particular, museum paintings, awaken a new reflexivity that can be used to construct new hypotheses and new ways of viewing history and society, as they reflect the ideologies and social structures of the time in which they were created. He saw museums not merely as places for the exhibition and preservation of art, but as spaces for cultural mediation. Consequently, he encouraged us to use iconographic or hermeneutic methods to identify their values and meanings. In the same vein, Agamben (2005) saw museums not as temples of art but as media for socialising values that need to be read in new ways and desacralised, with a view to revealing their hidden political dimensions.

Furthermore, cultural products do not belong solely to the past; they are connected to the present through their links to historical narratives, which form part of the body of knowledge and the visual landscape of contemporary individuals. Therefore, we cannot ignore their function, use and emotional effects. And there is a need for:

A critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating between the variety and historical specificity of their uses (Mitchell, 2009: 6).

Art is political, and politics finds both its representation and its influence in art. The presence or absence of human figures in paintings, along with the way their relationships are portrayed, serve as a mechanism for constructing presence, relevance, power and submission. Cultural and religious traditions, along with their associated representations and imagery, support and justify existing power structures (Gombrich, 2003). As historian Mary Beard (2020) noted, the pictorial representation of rulers around the world has the function of maintaining, exalting, justifying and legitimising their power.

Patriarchy is understood as a system that organises relational power between

men and women in a way that places women in positions of inequality and submission. Its influence permeates all situations and institutions through which social life is expressed and regulated (Rubin, 1986). It can therefore be expected to leave its mark on the representation of pictorial images with the aim of maintaining structures of male domination and minimising their effects. Feminist research has repeatedly pointed to the biased representation of women in art, whether in literature, painting, film, etc. Instead of being treated as complete and complex subjects with their own identities and agencies, they have often been represented in ways that highlight their physical appearance and sensuality, often in suggestive or nude poses, focusing on their bodies rather than their activities, social achievements or personalities. Nina Menkes (2018) underlined the objectified, passive and sexualised representation of women in film and enquired who films are intended for and who they address. Arranz (2020) showed gender stereotypes in Spanish television series, whereas Bernárdez *et al.* (2008) discussed the representation of gender roles in well-known films aimed at child and adult audiences and their evolution over time. In the same vein, Diana Russell (1975) stressed the normalisation of rape, which is understood as a manifestation of masculinity rather than as deviant social behaviour; while Susan Brownmiller (1981) underscored how the intimidation mechanisms that accompany sexual violence are often neglected and undervalued.

The same questions can be asked about paintings in museums that are representative of the history of art. Even in these temples of art, women are often stereotyped (Álvarez Tovar, 2020), reified (Berger, 2016), offered as objects of sexual desire to the gaze of the spectator to facilitate the voyeuristic enjoyment of their bodies and their sexuality.

Mieke Bal (2016) highlighted the idea of gender performativity in visual representations and artworks. The way characters are depicted (including the focus placed on them, the portrayal of their surroundings, and the narrator's or artist's point of view) influences how observers interpret and evaluate the scenes, while also shaping their emotional response. And this takes place without viewers having a clear awareness and perception of their influence. Despite the fact that patriarchy is naturalised in museums, museum representation evolves in parallel with the development of patriarchy, especially with women stepping into the world of art creation and their works being exhibited in places intended for this purpose. For this reason, there is a need for a feminist reinterpretation that analyses how women have gained access to the sphere of artistic production and explores possible new interpretations and implications (Pollock, 2022). Bal's (2016) cultural analysis of Rembrandt and Caravaggio provides a rhetorical and semiotic perspective in connection with the cultural context of these two artists. Her research is an original and thought-provoking analysis of the effects that the presentation of images has on the viewer's gaze, and it moves further to consider the artist's possible intentions in representing women.

Laura Mulvey's influential article on the voyeuristic male gaze in works of art (1975) has served as a catalyst for rethinking how pictorial images and the history of museums are viewed. The female nudes in paintings are analysed in terms of the effect they have on the viewer's gaze; especially when women's nudity represents sexual violence. The study by Amelia Jones (2012) on the representation of gender and sexuality in the history of art and its development into the contemporary era devoted special attention to images of rape and their ethical implications, pointing out their role in justifying and legitimising male

sexual violence. From this perspective, Alcalá Galán (2012), Mary Beard (2018), Solórzano (2016) and Tauroni (2020) have provided insightful analyses of how rape culture is represented in art history, highlighting the aestheticisation and sublimation of rape, alongside other forms of violence against women.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the representation and legitimation of violence, specifically against women's sexual freedom and dignity. Its adopts a multidisciplinary perspective that brings together visual sociology, critical theory and feminist thought. Having outlined an introductory perspective that invites a re-evaluation of the purposes and functions of museum-held paintings, including their ethical dimensions and political impact on the viewer, the next section will present a detailed discussion of the methodology employed. This will be followed by some findings regarding the omission or minimisation of harm and the beautification of victims; the interplay between pictorial narrative and gender; and the historical evolution of how sexual violence has been perceived. The paper will conclude with a discussion and some final considerations that will relate the assessment of these findings to the existing literature. This section will also identify the limitations of the present study and suggest avenues for future research.

## MULTIPLE WAYS IN WHICH SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS OVERLOOKED AND LEGITIMISED

Sexual violence is not a result of a pathology or circumstantial factors; it is a sustained mechanism of domination and an illegitimate appropriation of control over women's bodies and lives. The harm caused by this mechanism of unequal rights and resources often goes unrecognised, concealed and even legitimised by victims themselves (Fernández Villanueva, Revilla and Domínguez, 2015). It is possible to violate female bodies because they are historically and socially constituted as bodies that are available, that is, bodies at the disposal of the other or for the other, as is the case with other resources capable of being appropriated and transformed (Venebra, 2021). Sexism serves to legitimise, justify and downplay harmful acts against women, including physical, psychological, economic and sexual violence, as a means of maintaining patriarchal domination.

Legitimation is synonymous with justification. It means considering an action to be acceptable or justifiable. The legitimacy of an action is not only determined from an individual perspective, but must be understood as a social process (Johnson, Dowd and Ridgeway, 2006). Presenting acts of violence as legitimate is a complex—albeit highly common—process. Around 30 % of the violent actions shown in the media are presented as legitimised, and more than 60 % could be interpreted by viewers as legitimate, as they are portrayed in an ambivalent manner, with no clear cues provided to assess its appropriateness or justification (Fernández Villanueva *et al.*, 2009). Barbara Zecchi (2014) identified three processes that can legitimise or trivialise violence against women: omission, aestheticisation or naturalisation and, conversely, the exaggerated severity of violent acts when they are perpetrated by a woman. Legitimation encompasses a large number of processes and mechanisms that can be grouped into two types: structural legitimation and symbolic legitimation.

Structural legitimation operates in a direct way, supported by legal codes and the administration of justice. It is rooted in the

construction of legal categories, and works by excluding certain processes or situations from the category of violence and attributing grounded, positive motives or mere impulses to aggressors' behaviour. It also operates by attributing normality or benevolence to perpetrators, expressing disbelief towards victims, placing blame and responsibility on them, and downplaying both personal and social harm (Foucault, 2007).

Tolerance of all types of violence against women and, particularly, of sexual violence, was noted by Vigarello (1999), and more recently, by the Equality Now report (2017). A brief historical analysis reveals that, for centuries, legal codes have been highly tolerant of sexual violence against women, while also becoming gradually more intolerant of it from antiquity to the present. This statement broadly aligns with the view held by Robert Muchembled (2010), who observed a steady decline in brutality and homicide from the thirteenth century onwards, as well as with a theory by Norbert Elias's known as the "civilising process", which described a shift from actual violence to its ritualisation (Elias, 2020). The administration of justice on sexual violence crimes against women became slightly fairer and more objective when the notions of humiliation, defilement, psychological suffering, nervous system disorders and traumatisation as a consequence of rape were introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. Both advances in the recognition of subjectivity and studies on emotions and on psychological and moral damage have contributed to this. But once again, the mechanisms of power have used retaliation to deny moral damages; for example, if the raped woman had had a previous relationship, engaged in behaviour "outside the rules" or was a married woman (since the marriage bond justified rape).

Laws and regulations still fail to adequately protect women against sexual violence. What has come to be known as "rape culture" continues to normalise sexual violence, naturalise the harm caused and blame the victims (De Miguel, 2021). Nevertheless, when considering societies around the world as a whole, it can be said that, despite some exceptions, there has historically been a movement towards greater intolerance of such acts, with increasingly appropriate sanctions being implemented (Conley, 2014; Witt and DeMatteo, 2019). Progress towards the proper recognition of this crime has been driven by three key factors: a) the growing clarity around its nature and the extent of the harm it causes; b) the recognition that such harm has occurred continuously throughout history, as seen in the case of domestic abuse as a persistent offence; and c) the identification of the illegitimacy of the underlying motives behind sexual violence. On this last point, dismantling false interpretations and the ancestral and patriarchal myths that justified inflicting such harm, has been very effective. For example, the alleged sexually impulsive behaviour was increasingly replaced by sadistic and violent enjoyment, which is not to be confused with sexuality.

Symbolic legitimation consists of representations, images and narratives that are cultural symbols or myths and normalise violence, making it natural or acceptable. It is a subtle and complex process that has been found to be widespread throughout history. Narratives and images tend to minimise the harm caused by rape (which has often been euphemistically referred to as "abduction"), while its representation is beautified, sexualised and mystified, thus concealing its true nature as an act of aggression. This happens not only when the victims are women, but also in some cases of the rape of young men (Sculpture - "The Abduction of Ganymede")[1].

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[1] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Zeus_i_Ganimedes,_terracota._Taller_corinti,_480-479_aC._Museu_arqueològic_d%27Olímpia.JPG

Rape is very frequently found in Greek mythology and in the Homeric sagas. It is often the origin of stable relationships between gods, the birth of other gods and the emergence of differences between individuals. It constitutes a recurrent and profoundly characteristic aspect of the conduct displayed by the founding god Zeus and his brother Poseidon. Zeus exhibited this behaviour in his numerous "amorous affairs" with both mortal and immortal women. He is famous for his kidnappings, abductions and rapes. He raped Leda by metamorphosing into a swan to possess her, and he raped Europa by metamorphosing into a bull. Zeus also abducted and raped Ganymede, a young man (the most beautiful of mortals), as depicted in the famous Greek terracotta sculpture of the classical era called "The Abduction of Ganymede by Zeus". Zeus also raped his mother, Rhea, the goddess of the earth. Her sister Demeter did not escape this fate either, as Zeus deceived her by disguising himself as a bull before raping her. Then to placate her and avoid her revenge he tricked her a second time: he castrated a goat and claimed that he had castrated himself as a sign of repentance. The rape resulted in the birth of Persephone (Kore), who was also raped by her father, Zeus. Persephone was abducted (and raped) by Hades, god of the underworld, who took her as his wife and made her queen of the underworld (Koulianou and Fernández Villanueva, 2008). In this mythology, rape, preceded by deception, is depicted as heroic, necessary or having positive outcomes for the story. Both acts are therefore somewhat legitimised. Renaissance art historians, poets, sculptors and painters who drew inspiration from Greek mythology did not acknowledge the actual violence involved in rape, but mainly pointed to its aesthetic dimension, even glorifying "heroic" rape as signifying a union of the human with the divine (Wolfthall, 1999).

## OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to show how some—many—well-known painters whose works are exhibited in museums produced images that have legitimised sexual violence against women, encouraging a perception of such acts as being normal and acceptable. The aim is to identify the mechanisms used to depict violence that may influence viewers to recognise it as being normal or legitimate, thereby desensitising them to the victims' suffering. We also intend to describe the types of arguments that accompany or can be inferred from the explanations and images of acts of violence, tracing their historical development and examining the divergent perspectives adopted by artists. This will include, where feasible, consideration of the artists' gender, as well as their attitudes towards and positions on the social status of women. To this end, following Alonso (1994), this paper will analyse the images by focusing primarily on the socio-hermeneutic level. Alonso used three levels and forms of analysis: content analysis, semiotic analysis and socio-hermeneutic analysis. In line with Alonso, we believe that the last two analyses provide more relevant points of interest because they go beyond the explicit content of the images. Specifically, emphasis will be placed on the socio-hermeneutic dimension, by analysing discourses, contexts of enunciation and reception, and the underlying narratives. Examining images from this socio-hermeneutic perspective helps to raise awareness of "possible multiple interpretations, as well as highlighting the need to think about the specific context of the analysis (what is the purpose of the analysis/for whom is the analysis being conducted?)" (Serrano and Zurdo, 2010: 241). In other words, it is important to outline the communicative contexts of the images, such as their uses, the conditions of text production and the reception or consumption of these images or

visual texts. The purpose is to go beyond the boundaries of descriptive and informational analysis, as well as rhetorical and narrative approaches, since this perspective views discourses as practices linked to the intentions, interests and positions of the groups, individuals or entities involved in the communicative situation (Serrano and Zurdo, 2023).

When the object of legitimation is a cultural product, all the dimensions involved must be analysed. Firstly, the intentions of the sender, who renders it acceptable. In this case we started from the premise that the works exhibited in museums are often seen as potentially not harmful to viewers; on the contrary, their aesthetic and educational function is emphasised. This—prior and taken-for-granted—justification constitutes the initial framework to assess whether the paintings are suitable to the gaze of spectators. The content of each artwork is then to be considered, as well as the artistic production as a whole.

Legitimation is constructed by presenting perpetrators as having acceptable motives; portraying victims who are responsible or to blame for the actions; and assuming that there is little or no harm caused to or consequence for the victims. Specifically, the justificatory presentation of violence depends on three factors: 1. The representation and the version of the aggressors; 2. The representation and the version of the victims; 3. The representation and the version of the consequences (Fernández Villanueva, Domínguez and Revilla, 2007; Fernández Villanueva, Revilla and Bilbao, 2009). From the general socio-hermeneutic perspective outlined earlier, the analysis is aligned with that proposed by Roland Barthes' (1995), which identified two dimensions of artistic images: denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning is more explicit and concrete, while connotative meaning refers to the symbolism of the cultural context of the images. In this way, a non-exhaustive yet representative selection was made of pictorial works exhibited in museums that depict sexual violence against women. Some of the works by the most well-known and influential artists in the history of painting have been analysed, encompassing the period from the sixteenth century to the present day. The images were selected from the most famous and highly regarded works in the history of art that include the theme of rape, held in the collections of major museums. They span different historical periods, thereby enabling an examination of how the theme evolved over time. Some contemporary works have also been chosen because new social codes are currently being taken into account. The interest in taking a historical journey lies in the shift that has occurred in the viewers' gaze. The dimension of museum critique is of particular relevance, as it challenges the notion of the artwork as an immutable object in relation to the spectators' gaze. Instead, it acknowledges the changes surrounding its production and the diverse perspectives found among artists.

## RESULTS

### The omission or minimisation of harm and the beautification of the victims

The omission of the harm caused by sexual violence is very common in the history of painting. It can be effected in two ways. The most common approach involves reducing it to a mere act of dominance or a sexual act driven by a male sexual impulse, portrayed as natural and sometimes even glorified, with the perpetrators often being depicted as heroes. This representation entirely omits any suggestion of there being negative consequences for the victim.

This is the case in the "Abduction of Ganymede by Zeus" referred to above. The

sculpture depicts a young man who is being abducted (to be raped, which is omitted) and is portrayed as if he were his child, who is lovingly led and does not show the slightest discomfort. Zeus appears radiant and triumphant while abducting the beautiful boy. The parallel posture of the figures does not indicate any aggressiveness, but unity and harmony instead. In the same vein, Pindar's poetry (Olympic ode) can be interpreted as glorifying this union between a god and a mortal as a spiritual one (Robinson, 2025).

Another well-known image is the "The Abduction of Europa"[2], painted by Titian and similarly reproduced by other Renaissance painters, including Rubens. The bull that rapes Europa is in fact Zeus, who disguises himself as a bull and deceives his victim in order to abduct and rape her. This pattern was repeated in the rape of Leda, whom Zeus tricks by metamorphosing into a swan. This is a sexually-motivated abduction, like all the others. However, the use of the word "abduction" in the title alters the meaning by removing the sexual connotation, and above all, by sanitising the pain, humiliation and negative consequences for the victim. She is portrayed as if she were being gloriously led to a celebration by the bull, with the complicity of cupids, who frame the act as a loving impulse. Another example is Peter Paul Rubens' painting "Leda and the Swan"[3], which repeats the prototype of the rape of Europa, as she is deceived by a swan (who is actually Zeus) and is depicted without any hint of pain or discomfort, as if theirs were a loving relationship. In addition to rape, these stories and paintings to some extent legitimise

deception as an interpersonal relationship strategy that is used to facilitate rape.

The omission of harm is a justificatory strategy present in other, milder types of sexual violence. The paintings Susanna and the Elders by Tintoretto (1560–1565) and Veronese (1580) emphasise the beauty and sensuality of the victim, Susanna, who, according to the biblical account, was harassed and threatened by two elderly men. These representations convey no indication that the female figure experiences fear, suffering or humiliation; nor do they suggest any sense of moral transgression on the part of the aggressors.

Another way of mystifying and distorting the harm caused is to confuse sexual violence with violence within the entanglements of power. Confusing images suggesting that the victim is to blame and her intention is to seduce the rapist are commonly found, such as for example, in the rape of Tamar[4,5]. This painting, which depicts a biblical account in which Tamar (or Thamar) is raped by her brother Amnon, presents her in a seductive pose and without any sign of harm. This framing suggests a sexual impulse behind the act, and serves to absolve the male aggressor of blame by portraying him as merely responding to beauty and sexuality with desire, while shifting responsibility and blame onto the figure of the seductress.

Other stories make the harm caused explicit, such as that portrayed in "The Levite and his Concubine"[6], in which the dead

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[2] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubens_-_El_rapto_de_Europa.jpg

[3] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leda_and_the_Swan_by_Peter_Paul_Rubens_-_WGA.jpg

[4] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amnon_and_Tamar_by_Lucio_Massari.jpg

[5] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philip_van_Santvoort_-_Amnon_overweldigt_Tamar_(2_Samuel_13-11-14)_-_NG3404_-_National_Gallery.jpg

[6] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Levite_of_Ephraim_by_A.F.Caminafe_(1837,_Lyon).jpg

woman is shown being picked up by her relatives. But in this case, the harm that is recognised and depicted is not due to the rape but to the death of the woman, who leaves her tribe without offspring. The harm caused to the victim is made apparent, as well as the condolences of her relatives, who collect and mourn her. The grief of the relatives is expressed more explicitly and dramatically by another woman, who is supported and comforted by a man. This is a representation of the stereotype of grieving women who suffer more for others, as shown in the many images of the descent and death of Jesus, accompanied by the mourning women who hold him.

However, there is a significant omission from this image. In the biblical story, Lucretia, the Levite's so-called concubine, is offered by her husband to be raped, in order to prevent the rape of a male guest of her husband's. In other words, her husband is complicit in offering her to prevent a man from being raped. Her rapists kill her and this crime is punished, sparking off a war between tribes. The story of the Levite's concubine significantly illustrates the different way in which sexual violence has been seen, depending on whether it is perpetrated against men or women. The avoidance of sexual violence against men (which is classified as a crime) somehow legitimises sexual violence against women.

In all these cases, those condemned are not punished for perpetrating sexual violence, but to justify male decisions that are commonly made in inter-group struggles. The punishment of Lucretia's rapist is justified by the fact that he has questioned Lucretia's husband; Lucretia is considered to be her husband's property, and therefore it is the affront to the husband that is punished rather than the harm caused to the victim. In the rape of the Levite's concubine (who died as a result), the punishment was based on the fact that the Levite's clan was left childless, not on the

sexual harm inflicted on his concubine. This is also the case with the images of the "Abduction of the Sabine Women", which conceals asexual violence for the sake of the goal of conquest.

## Pictorial storytelling and genre

There is a very small percentage of artworks by women in the history of painting, with an even smaller fraction representing portrayals of sexual violence from a female perspective. But significant differences can be identified in the construction of the story in the few cases available to us. To illustrate this point, we can compare different versions of the painting "Susanna and the Elders". In contrast to medieval representations of this biblical passage (Daniel 13: 1–64), which typically depict the moment when Daniel exposes the false testimony of the elders—who, after being rejected by Susanna, accused her of adultery—Venetian painters showed a marked preference for the story's opening scene, in which Susanna is observed by the elders while she bathes. The image prioritises the subject matter that may be preferred by male viewers: the naked female body, albeit wrapped in clothing typically found in the portrayal of scenes from the Bible. Most painters visualised this biblical episode in the form of a courtesan taking a bath.

The paintings by Tintoretto, by a disciple of Lambert Sustris and by Paolo Veronese[7] present a beautified Susanna, devoid of pain and almost suggestive, as if she were offering herself willingly to a natural sexual experience. In fact, they represent a version of the story from the perspective of her stalkers: she seduced them by carelessly bathing naked in their garden. The intentions of the elders, as well as their act, may seem perfectly acceptable and normalised.

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[7] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Susana_y_los_viejos_(El_Veronés).jpg

The spectator's gaze can comfortably "rest" on Susanna's sensuality and viewers can feel that they are participating in or desiring her beauty, omitting the violent characteristic of a threatening act of harassment.

In contrast, the same subject, as painted by Artemisia Gentileschi in 1610, shows two unmistakable features that condemn the violence suffered by Susanna. Her aggressors are portrayed conspiring against her, showing their hidden or unspeakable dark intentions, while the victim covers her half-naked body, her face showing discomfort or pain and expressing rejection. The spectator is shown Susanna's suffering and can sense her defencelessness, as she seems to try to protect herself from her vulnerable, powerless situation.

## The period does not explain everything. Differentiating artists' sensitivities/values

While from the Renaissance to the present day there has been a growing awareness of the harm caused by sexual violence and its perpetrators have certainly become increasingly delegitimised, some compassionate perspectives and sensitive portrayals of suffering can be found in some painters' artwork across all historical periods. This is undoubtedly due to the different sensibilities and social values of these artists. In this regard, a revealing contrast emerges between painters such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)— as seen in his works "The Abduction of Europa" and "The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus" —and some of his contemporaries, notably Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), whose interpretations in "The Abduction of Europa"[8] and "The Abduction of Proserpina"[9] offer markedly different approaches.

[8] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Rembrandt_Abduction_of_Europa.jpg

[9] Access the image via Wikimedia Commons: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Rembrandt_Harmensz._van_Rijn_123.jpg

Comparing the works of these two artists clearly exposes, on the one hand, the sexualisation, exaltation and omission of the victim's pain depicted in Rubens' paintings and, on the other hand, the non-sexualisation, the understanding of violence and of the victim's pain, and of her relatives or other characters, who clearly deplore her abduction and rape in Rembrandt's works. In Rubens's paintings, the omission of pain suggests that the rape is naturalised, as it is reduced to a mere sexual act or even an act of love, as indicated by the cupids accompanying the image, symbolising amorous sentiment. Conversely, the faces of the abductors (rapists) do not indicate that an illegal or harmful act has been committed; rather, their representation is natural and normalised. By contrast, Rembrandt's painting is rendered in dark and somewhat sombre tones. Europa is snatched away against her will by a bull that leads her into dangerous waters before the distressed and dissatisfied gaze of her relatives, who deplore the event. The same interpretation is suggested in the abduction of Proserpina, in which the abductee clearly resists and tries to break away from her unwanted captor, while some characters—who are pulling at her clothing—protest, attempt to prevent the assault and are visibly pained by the situation.

Rembrandt does not even expose the woman's naked body. His painting directs the viewer's gaze towards her problem, her resistance, her humiliation, her rejection and her pain, to which the artist is clearly sensitive. Thus, it presents a surprisingly nuanced and critical view of the relationships between the masculine and the feminine. Unlike Rubens, he does not entice spectators to engage in voyeuristic pleasure but raises their awareness of the difficulty in, perception of, and identification with the harm suffered by the abducted woman. These emotions touch the other

characters portrayed in the painting and, by extension, the viewers. In this image by Rembrandt, a shift in values is at work. Essentially, it invites viewers to adopt a new gaze, fresh grounds for identification, and a different political effect. The same is true of Rembrandt's other paintings of women: Lucretia, Bathsheba, Judith and Susanna. Another example of delegitimised violence is the much lesser known painting by the Spanish painter José de Ribera "Susanna and the Elders" (1615) held in the San Diego Museum of Arts.

## The historical evolution of the gaze on sexual violence

Sensitivity and intolerance to sexual violence have evolved over the past centuries. This has not only been made apparent in legal codes (which increasingly define sexual violence offences in more explicit and detailed terms), but also by the fact that these are now legally penalised. Works of art, and paintings in particular, have also evolved in the same direction, even though there are still remnants of insensitivity, legitimation or justification of the harm caused. A striking shift in perspectives has taken place over time, as exemplified by the contrast between Tintoretto's cheerful and sexualised "Leda and the Swan", which offers the viewer a legitimation of deception, an omission of the victim's pain and a voyeuristic gaze; and the non-suffering body of the raped woman in Degas's "The Rape" (also known as "Interior"). Degas's almost clothed woman on her knees clearly shows her pain and does not invite a voyeuristic gaze. Rather, it seems to condemn or delegitimise the man who is supposedly the rapist. He is presented as dark and insensitive, a pictorial metaphor for someone who is guilty or has dark intentions. Within this historical selection of

paintings, special mention must be made of Spanish painter Francisco de Goya, whose gaze stands out for its modernity and progressive character, particularly in two representations of rape: "The Abduction of Europa" (1772), held in a private collection, and "The Horse-Abductor" (1815), housed in the Prado Museum.

In a later period, Magritte left no doubt of his symbolic conception of the act of rape, offering a representation of sexual violence with multiple meanings, all of them negative in nature: objectification, total sexualisation of female identity and depersonalisation, by transforming a woman's head into her sexual attributes.

An artwork that elicits a completely different gaze from viewers is the performance entitled "Ablutions" (1972) by the artists Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani. It was a performance of a rape that reproduced the testimonies of the emotions, smells and forms of bodies subjected to sexual violence. The spectators' experience was one of rejection and repulsion, which made it impossible to gaze voyeuristically at the naked bodies, changing the meaning of the female nude in art.

Nowadays it is common to find images and works of art created with the aim of denouncing social problems, in this case, sexual violence, such as the painting "La violación" [The Rape] by José Clemente Orozco, which denounced violence and military torture in Mexico. This belongs to a set of drawings commissioned from the same author known as "Los horrores de la Revolución" [The Horrors of the Revolution] (1926-1928). Another example would be "La manada: NO es NO" [The Pack: NO means NO], by Antonio Marcos Ripoll, which denounced the gang rape of an eighteen-year-old girl by five men in Pamplona (Navarra, Spain) in 2016, as well as its subsequent repercussion in

Spanish society and the support for the victim with large-scale feminist protests.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In line with the arguments put forward by Bal (2016), Deepwell (2020) and Pollock (2022), our analysis has confirmed that there is no narrative impartiality in works of art. Instead, they specifically represent social relations and power, in this case, patriarchal power.

As has been shown, many acts depicted in prototypical images from art and culture, particularly in well-known paintings, present sexual violence that has been legitimised by the use of various compositional mechanisms. The benevolent representation of the aggressors, the minimisation of the harm inflicted upon the victims, and not infrequently, the apportionment of responsibility or blame to the victims. Thus, in contrast to beautified victims whose pain is absent, aggressors are naturalised, exalted or turned into heroes.

The legitimation of sexual violence in the paintings is supported by the cultural narratives from which they emerge, and in many cases is reinforced by the symbolic cues of the titles. The choice of the title "abduction of..." is not irrelevant in terms of the viewer's perception and gaze, considering that the action that ultimately takes place is rape. And it is not only sexual violence against women that is symbolically justified, but also the violence exerted by powerful men on powerless men, such as in the abduction of young Ganymede by the great god Zeus, the symbolism and meaning of which remains in some Renaissance works, particularly in one of the painters who most legitimised sexual violence, Peter Paul Rubens, with "The Abduction of Ganymede" (1636-1638, Prado Museum), from whose benevolent vision Rembrandt also distanced himself in "The Abduction of Ganymede" (1635, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen collection).

A gendered analysis of the creators of artworks addressing this subject reveals that legitimation is found almost exclusively in works by male painters (albeit not in all cases, as there are some exceptions), whereas works by women, such as those by Gentileschi, tend not to legitimise such violence. A look at the history of art shows that some artists have been more tolerant than others of the justification of sexual violence, and more sensitive or empathetic towards the victims in their works, even when they were contemporaries.

It is necessary to acknowledge the significant differences among male artists, even among those who were contemporaries, which points to the influence of their individual values and perspectives on how art is created and on the promotion of different types of gaze.

In the seventeenth century, artists such as Rembrandt were sensitive to the problem of power over women and "realists" in how they depicted the meaning of rape and sexual violence. As Bal (2016) noted, Rembrandt's paintings show a surprisingly sympathetic and critical view of the relations between the masculine and the feminine, as well as of the suffering and vulnerable position of women. This was the case not only in the works analysed above, but also in other paintings by him which featured biblical figures. His paintings offer a gaze that differs from the voyeuristic one that Rubens seems to have promoted. What is relevant is not only the historical period within which painters worked, which changed pictorial representations, but also the values and ethics of the artists. Rembrandt, Ribera and Goya portrayed aggressors whose actions were less justified. Their paintings were more sensitive to the pain of victims and aggressors and there-

fore did not legitimise the latter as most of their contemporaries did.

Legitimation has generally evolved in parallel with legal discourses, which have consistently failed to suitably address sexual violence, both historically and in contemporary contexts. As has been the case in legal codes, the art world has shown an evolving understanding of the reality of such acts and a more negative assessment of perpetrators throughout history, from the past to the present day. This involved a shift from failing to recognise the harm caused and normalising the perpetrators' intentions to clearly portraying their unlawful purposes and making the harm visible and significant, both as perceived by the viewer and as acknowledged by other figures within the paintings. However, this condemnation and progressive intolerance has not been consistent over the different periods. There have been works produced in the twentieth century by highly influential artists such as Picasso, whose "Susanna and the Elders" presented the same legitimising perspective on sexual violence as that found in Renaissance paintings. Susanna was depicted as an object to be looked at, her body entirely available to the male gaze, while the elderly harassers are portrayed without any suggestion of wrongdoing or harmful intent.

The social effects of the uncritical view of these works are significant and relate to both reflection and emotions. When the harm suffered by victims is omitted or minimised, the viewer is deprived of the opportunity to reflect on the consequences of sexual violence, feel potential indignation at the injustice that may result from an inadequate recognition of the harm, and develop compassionate feelings or a sense of responsibility towards the victims. The viewer is thus prevented from experiencing empathy and compassion. The perception of suffering is a substantial element in spec-

tators' reactions to enable them to identify with the victims (Güney, 2011; Fernández Villanueva, Domínguez and Bilbao, 2011; Fernández Villanueva and Revilla, 2016). Portraying male figures as playing an active role and female figures as objects to be looked at (Berger, 2016) encourages a complacent and sanitised view of sexual domination and humiliation. The "transfer of the gaze" (Tisseron 1995, 2003) would be easy for male viewers, for the perpetrators of sexual violence who find their act of harassment or violence legitimised and can voyeuristically enjoy the actions of the aggressors; whereas women are confronted with a sense of strangeness because their suffering is not acknowledged, preventing them from identifying with the victims due to the manner in which the female figures are represented.

The results are largely consistent with Mulvey's (1975) theory of voyeuristic viewing, according to which the complacent gaze of the artist favours a pleasurable, exalted or minimised view of violence against women. And they are also aligned with Zecchi's (2014) theory whereby the explicit expression of violence against women in some films can stimulate sadism and the complicit gaze of the spectator in the same way as pornographic images. They offer a stark contrast to the "Ablutions" performance by Lacy, Chicago, Orgel, Laster and Rahmani on rape, which generated completely different experiences. The viewer could not maintain a voyeuristic gaze and their emotions were rejection and disgust.

Artworks can be viewed in many different ways. We agree with Bal (2016) that, while there is very little discussion of what is involved in viewing, there are multiple ways of approaching the contemplation of works of art. There are deceptive visions, sexual visions, cruel visions and also desires to see or desires to avoid seeing. A feminist reading of art aims to change our awareness of the implications of artistic representations and our

gaze on them. It must therefore have an effect on the education of spectators, as well as on the criticism and social assessment of artworks and their creators. The ethical dimension becomes relevant within this perspective. Museum exhibitions take objectivity for granted, in terms of the value of the works they present to the public. It is easy to conclude that artworks are simply there to be seen by all, but it must not be forgotten that the image as an act possesses enormous power (Bredekamp, 2017), and that looking at it has performative potential and the capacity to engage the viewer (Fernández Villanueva, Revilla and Domínguez, 2011). In other words, exhibitions have an impact on visitors and influence their thought processes, emotions and affects.

Consequently, it is useful to analyse conservative artforms and their authors. As the act of painting or photographing is also performative (Bal, 2021), it has the capacity to maintain or transcend the dominant reality, it can prompt action in the context of other cultural products. An image, be it a painting or a photograph, never operates alone, independently of other productions. The interpretation of an image always refers to others and, together with them, it has the capacity to transform the past, change its position, reappropriate it or repeat it. Art's political capacity for transformation derives from the relationship that images have with previous images. Thus, the possibility of creating new readings harbours the potential for new sets of meanings, new values and new desires to be created. The production of desire in our collective imagination is related to the gazes that are produced and the gazes that are enabled. It is therefore useful to uncover how we look and at whom, because the critical gaze can transform what our desires, our body and our identity represent.

Acknowledging the complacent gaze towards sexual violence in the history of painting can help reshape the social framing and assessment of the issue. It can also prevent our gaze from becoming desensitised to its normalisation, thus guarding against our becoming unwittingly complicit in the subtle ways such violence is depicted and legitimised. Rosalind Krauss's (2013) idea of the optical unconscious warns of the underlying symbolic processes which, although not directly accessible to consciousness and rationalisation, influence the perception of artworks. Visual structures, composition, the position of the figures, the extent of their presence, or the absence of certain elements affect the understanding of the meanings, emotions and affections of those who view them. As we have shown, rape culture is made up of ancient myths whereby rape is considered to be natural, to be part of love or sexual impulse, and is rooted in the oldest cultural narratives and reproduced in many works of art. Therefore, uncovering their presence in these types of artworks can help raise awareness of possible intentions or effects that would otherwise go unnoticed at first glance. In 2024, an exhibition was held at the Prado Museum entitled "El espejo perdido" [The Lost Mirror], which analysed the stereotypes of Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity in medieval Spain. The exhibition focused on subtle mechanisms of presentation and connotative elements such as poses, colours and the forms of figures, which conveyed the values and stereotypes embedded in the paintings. It would be interesting to hold exhibitions on similar terms in connection with the historical misrepresentation of the harm and intentions behind pictures of sexual violence in order to raise awareness of these practices.

The results yielded by this analysis reveal new nuances and dimensions of the reality of acts of sexual violence. The progress made regarding laws and regulations on this subject throughout history has involved assigning increasingly refined names to offences, introducing legal categories that reflect the reality and nuances of harm, and gaining a clearer understanding of the

individual and social consequences of acts of violence, particularly of rape. Naming and revealing the effects of legitimised violence in works of art are overlapping objectives. We believe that they can have a concurrent impact in terms of improving justice.

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